

The Most Important Sources for Family Research in the Slovak Archives

by Milan Belej

Anyone with an interest in performing genealogical research must rely on many sources that, as a rule, are held in various locations and within various institutions. For research performed by the descendants of former immigrants from the territory of Slovakia, the most important sources are those held in the territory of the Slovak Republic. The most significant and numerous are those that are stored in three types of state archives in Slovakia.

Of the documents held in the state central archives (both in Bratislava and Banská Bystrica) only a small number can be used for purposes of genealogical research. Up to a point, the 1930 census records held in Bratislava can be used when performing family research, but the same information from this period is available in the local register offices. For those interested in the research of emigration in the early 1920s, some information can be obtained from thousands of emigration questionnaires held in Bratislava within an archive collection called Minister with full Power for Administration of Slovakia. Nevertheless, they are neither filed alphabetically nor geographically by region, so they are useful only in a very limited way.

For purposes of genealogical research the most important are the documents held in the State Regional Archives. These archives contain the parish registers including up to the year 1895, as a rule, i. e. from the period preceding the introduction of the civil registers in the Kingdom of Hungary. They belong to the archive group called Collections of Parish Registers. The parish registers are considered the primary and the most significant source. Without their help further research very often cannot be performed. The regional archives contain the registers of five legal denominations from the Slovak territory up to 1895 – Roman Catholic, Greek Catholic, Lutheran, Calvinist and Jewish. Every regional archive acquires the parish registers coming from the territory of districts the archive is responsible for, according to the system of state administration that

existed before 1996.

The state regional archives contain nearly complete collections of the parish registers from the period up to 1895 with exception of those that were removed abroad by German communities in 1945 and those held in the Archives of the Capital of the Slovak Republic, Bratislava (parish registers from Bratislava). Copies of some parish registers are held in some district archives, too. Those who are interested in their use should take into consideration the fact, that many registers were destroyed during the centuries due to wars, disasters, etc. In this respect the region of Northeastern Slovakia should be mentioned. Due to the difficult struggles during World War II in 1944 – 1945 many parish registers in this area were destroyed, making it a very difficult task to perform any genealogical research concerning the affected parishes. Those registers coming from the period after 1895 have been held in the civil register offices to date. Any person interested in their use should send his/her application to the pertinent register office. It is advisable to send a letter via the pertinent local office, if the address of the register office is unavailable.

Most of the registers held in the state regional archives in Slovakia were microfilmed in cooperation with the Family History Library (FHL) of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (LDS) of Salt Lake City, Utah, so they are available to genealogists in the U.S.A. The only exception is the collection of parish registers from the State Regional Archives in Nitra, but the process of its microfilming is drawing to an end, too.

The state regional archives' holdings include a large collection of documents coming from the activity of former county offices up to the end of 1922. Within the mentioned collection there are various types of documents that may be very helpful, when performing genealogical research. Particularly the census-records from 1857 and 1869 should be mentioned. Very reliable data from these censuses enable the researcher to supplement the information gained from the registers. For purposes of genealogical research the only useful census-documents are census-papers, containing information about a particular house and its inhabitants, which are considered very detailed and reliable facts. The census lists have not been completely preserved. The majority of them are held in state regional archives in Slovakia, while others are in the county archives in Hungary. The majority of the preserved 1869 census-papers, similar to the parish registers, are on microfilms

available to researchers through the holdings of the Family History Library. The microfilming process, however, has not yet been completed. Together with parish registers, the census-papers are the most valuable documents for genealogical research and at the same time these documents are very frequently used by professional genealogists and other users.

Within the archive collections of former counties are many documents that can be used to some extent, for family research. In this respect the oldest Hungarian nation-wide lists of the population can be mentioned. Nevertheless, their use is very limited. These documents include, tax registration (1715) and its revision (1720), various county lists (lists of serfs, tobacco smokers, millers, Jews, etc.) The newer documents include Hungarian nation-wide registration of population (1784-1785, 1786, 1787), regional tax registration (1828), the registration of the population (1850-1851) and the collection of documents called "nobilitaria". The documents held within the county archive groups are kept in the state regional archives in Slovakia, however, some are stored in Hungarian archives.

From the standpoint of genealogical research they are considered secondary sources. They include information about the economic and social situations of families. The main problem is in properly identifying the registered persons, primarily in the documents recorded in the 18th century and earlier. This was the period preceding the use of permanent surnames. In addition, the mentioned documents are incomplete and they are part of the unarranged county archive collections. They are time consuming to study and their state of preservation does not guarantee a positive result. For purposes of genealogical research the voters-lists from the second half of the 19th century can also be used. In the period before 1918, however, the privilege was granted only to a limited numbers of inhabitants. The majority of people, especially the rural peasants were without privilege to vote. The voters-lists contain the information necessary to determine the economic status, age, or place of residence of the person being searched.

For any genealogist who wants to use the county archive materials it is important to know which of seven existing regional archives can be used with respect to the county archive material he/she is interested in. The State Regional Archives in Prešov hold the archive collections for Šariš county as well as portions of the archive collections for Zemplín and Už counties. Archive collections of Abov-Turňa county can be found



Building of Regional Archive in Prešov, Slovakia

in the regional archives in Košice. In the third regional archives in Eastern Slovakia – in Levoča – are held the archive collections of former Spiš county.

The holdings of the State Regional Archives in Banská Bystrica consist of archive collections coming from a large part of Central Slovakia. In Banská Bystrica a person can study and search the documents of four counties from the period up to the end of 1922. Archive collections from the former counties of Zvolen and Gemer-Malohont have been preserved nearly complete. Nevertheless, only fragments of the archive collections from Hont county are available now to users due to destruction during World War II in 1945. Archive collections for Novohrad county are well preserved but only fragments are available in Slovakia. In the second of the regional archives in Central Slovakia, in Bytča, there are held well-preserved archive collections for four counties: Liptov, Orava, Turiec and Trenčín up to 1922.

In the State Regional Archives in Nitra one may study and search the documents of three former counties: Komárno, Tekov and Nitra, which cover a large part of the territory of Western and Southwestern Slovakia. In the State Regional Archives in Bratislava are held the documents of former Bratislava county.

As mentioned above, in some regional archives there are held only fragments of some county archive collections. Due to the establishment of Succession States in 1918, that replaced the former Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, the territory of some counties has been divided and thus has become part of two neighbouring states. Despite the division of their territories, the archive collections of former counties have not been

divided and now they are kept only in one place, in one state or the other, as a rule. When the need arises in the course of genealogical research to use the documents from archive collections of some former counties, then it is necessary to send a request to the archives in Hungary (in the case of Zemplín and Novohrad counties) or to the archives in Ukraine (in the case of Už county).

Specific information is possible to obtain from the archival collections called judicial affairs that formerly were held in the regional archives in Slovakia. Their section are so-called Theresian land- registers (rentals) from the 1770s. They were recorded separately for each village. They include tables containing the names of serfs – owners or tenants of peasant plots. Nevertheless, no dependants are recorded in them, only the head of household. The registers can be used only on the assumption that the recorded person(s) have been accurately identified. With the help of Theresian land-registers it is possible to study the social and economic situation of registered persons. Within the documents comprising the section of the archive collection called judicial affairs, various types of land-register documents can be found such as land-register books, land-register papers, land-register trials and registration of the changes in land ownership. The land-register documents originate from the second half of the 19th century.

During genealogical research it is sometimes useful to use the documents held in the archival collections of the noble families. They are also held in the regional archives. They offer much information about the serfs. The most useful documents are mainly the land-registers of the dominions (the oldest are from the 17th century), the lists of serfs and Jews, testimonial evidence in trials, rent contracts, etc. The study of these documents is, however, extremely time consuming. The archival collections of the noble families are the primary source for the genealogical research of the nobility. Many genealogical charts and informational records from register, family correspondence, last wills and contracts can be found there. The archive collections of the royal dominion can be used in a limited way. Among the documents preserved from these collections are the detailed personal records of the state employees since the middle of the 18th century.

Americans of Slovak origin are also interested in documents that can complete their information about how their ancestors emigrated to the USA. Most of the documents concerning this topic are held in the state regional archives. The documents are found in the

archive collections of county and small town administrative offices. The most important data are recorded in the documents from the period before the year 1922. The part of these documents is called "emigration affairs" and they sometimes include the lists of emigrants and re-emigrants. Searching for these documents within the archive group is very time-consuming. Moreover, their informational value is not very useful, as the records contain only names of emigrants, without any further detailed information about them.

More information can be obtained from the applications for emigration passports. Although they belong to county archive collections, great differences sometimes occur between them with respect to their state of preservation and the amount of detail in information they contain. With regard to their use, the best examples are those providing information on personal data of emigrants, the applicant's physical characteristics, and intent of their emigration. Despite the significance of information, they are infrequently searched due to their number and the fact that no special locating aids, or name indexes have been prepared to search them.

The passports registration books are another very important source. Nevertheless, they have not been completely preserved. The structure of the columns in passport registration books is not the same everywhere. There are counties with very detailed records in mentioned books, such as Orava or Trenčín, while the quality of records from Šariš scarcely allows for reliable identification of the persons recorded. It is difficult to use them because of their numbers, they are not arranged alphabetically and they do not include any name index.

In the system of state archives in Slovakia a very significant place is occupied by the state district archives. From the viewpoint of family research the most important archive collections are those of the town councils. They represent a special category of the documents. They are held primarily in the district and municipal archives, but also in regional archives. Many documents have been preserved in the mentioned collections. They contain the detailed information about the burghers. The most important include lists and census of the town inhabitants, registration of the people who could stay and live in the town, the registration of property, the registration of tradesmen and workmen, guild papers, the town tax registers, testaments, etc. Despite the fact that the majority of the parish registers are held in the regional archives, some of them can be

found in the district archives, too. Most of all, the parish registers of the Slovak capital Bratislava should be mentioned in this context. They are held in the Bratislava archives. Some copies of parish registers are held in some district archives, too.

The outlined information on the holdings of the state archives could be supplemented by the information of those documents that are held in special archives (e.g. military archives) and church archives. Because they are not considered to be public archives, the use of their holdings is possible only under special rules, and their archive collections are therefore not searched as frequently by large numbers of genealogists like those of the state archives are.

About the Author

Milan Belej, graduated in 1989 from the Faculty of Arts, P.J. Šafárik University in Prešov in Russian Philology and History. Milan received his Csc degree (Ph.D.) from Comenius University in Bratislava, with his thesis "The Emigration from Slovakia to the U.S.A. during the period 1918-1938." He is general counsellor and deputy director of the State Regional Archive in Prešov. He also is engaged in genealogical research for applicants from the U.S.A. Milan made his first trip to the U.S.A. in 2001 as invited speaker at the CGSI's 8th Genealogical/Cultural Conference in Pittsburgh, PA. Milan may be reached by e-mail at either of the two addresses, muransky@sousluz.sk or muransky@granito.sk



Milan Belej of Prešov, Slovakia speaking at CGSI Conference. Photograph courtesy of John Richnavsky www.moodsimage.com

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System of Slovak Archives and Their Use

by Milan Belej

The system of archives and the use of archive documents in Slovakia are administered by special archival legislation. At present, Law on Maintaining Archives (No. 332/ 1992) from 1991, which amended the previous one from 1975 remains the chief legal regulation in this sphere. It was prepared shortly after the fall of the communist regime (1989) in order to meet new demands. Although the amended law proved to be very useful for some years, the need to adopt an entirely new law arose very quickly. This is why at present a new law on archives and registries is being prepared. If the act is passed it shall be legislatively enforced in the second half of the year 2002 (or at the beginning of 2003).

The present system as well as organization of Slovakia's archives is defined by archival legislation in effect. Archives are defined as the institutions, which are responsible for acquiring, preserving and making the documents available. The law also defines the system of state archives that hold a special, predominant position. According to law three categories of state archives presently exist in Slovakia: the state central archives, the state regional archives and, finally, the state district archives.

The most important position in Slovakia's state archive system is occupied by the state central archives. They hold the documents of nation-wide importance and the documents coming from the activities of central offices of various Slovak governmental institutions and their predecessors. There are presently two archives of this kind in Slovakia: the Slovak National Archives in Bratislava and the State Central Mining Archives in Banská Štiavnica. Apart from the significant position of both mentioned institutions, the contents of documents holds a very limited potential use to genealogists.

The state regional archives house the documents of the regional institutions and administration. In other words the documents in their collections are those coming from the institutions that occupy the middle level in the system of state administration, such as present-day region (*kraj*) or former county (*župa*). Presently there are seven regional archives in the Slovak republic. Three of them are located in Eastern Slovakia – Košice,

Levoča, and Prešov; two are located in Central Slovakia – Banská Bystrica and Bytča (near Žilina); the last two are in Western Slovakia – Nitra and Bratislava. The most important documents for purposes of genealogical research are held in the State Regional Archives.

A very significant position is occupied by the state district archives in Slovakia's system of state archives. The state district archives house the documents of the local town councils' administration or local, district institutions. Prior to the 1996 reform of the state administration, a state district archive was established in each district town. Nevertheless, after 1996 these type of archives were established only in some of the new districts. That is why the number of districts and district offices now outnumber district archives. Presently there are 37 district archives in Slovakia. In the amended Law on Maintaining Archives the district archives are considered branches of the regional archives. Nevertheless, there will be no changes with respect to their holdings.

According to the provision of the law in force, the municipal archives (that are not considered state archives) can be formed by the municipal authorities. Nevertheless, this opportunity has been seized by only two towns, so presently municipal archives exist in Bratislava and Košice, which happen to be two of the most important cities in Slovakia. Both the archives in Bratislava and in Košice were, however, established in the period before 1989.

A special category of archives are those of legal entities. Two main types of archives can be distinguished within this category according to the 1992 law: 1) the archives of factories/plants and 2) the archives of special importance. To the latter belong the archives of the organizations or institutions of culture, science and information, the archives of churches and church organizations, and universities, all of them organizations of nation-wide character and importance.

The amended law defines two basic groups of archives – public and private archives. Included within public archives are those defined as state and municipal archives and archives of the legal and personal entities, that belong to public administration. Also included here are all present-day types of state archives. There are no changes in the proposal with respect to the central archives. In Slovakia there shall remain two central archives – Slovak National Archives in Bratislava and the State Central Mining Archives in Banská Štiavnica. There are some changes, however, with respect to the present-day regional and district archives. In the proposal the state regional archives are defined as state

archives with regional territorial (jurisdiction?) competence. Present district archives are defined as their branches. Despite their modified position in Slovakia's archival system, the organization of their holdings will remain the same.

The general provisions that regulate the use of archive documents are determined by law. Foreign citizens hold equal status to Slovak citizens regarding the use of archival documents and no special permission is required for their study. All documents held in the state archives can be searched with the exception of those defined by law. The aim of these restrictions is to protect personal data, the state and economic interests of the Slovak Republic and to establish conditions to protect the archive documents. That is why the general access date is set in force by law, which prevents study of the documents for a period of thirty years from their creation. The public is prohibited from using damaged and unarranged documents to avoid the possibility of their entire destruction.

According to the proposals the new law should not set the general access date when documents are available to the public. Instead it should guarantee a more proper protection of personal data. Permission to study records containing personal data may be given, therefore, only 90 years following the date of their recording. In contrast to current law, the new proposal will clearly define the types of documents not accessible to the public. These include damaged or unarranged documents and those containing information important from the standpoint of economic or political security of the Slovak Republic, etc.

The right to study and use the archive documents is adjusted by each archive through its own rules of study in accordance with current law. Their structure and content are outlined in a special instruction, although while amended, will remain valid after passage of the new law. Rules for studying are the result of general provisions of the Law on Archives, and the specific working conditions of each archive (character of archive documents, storage space and physical condition, technology, research room capacity, etc.). This is why two archives of the same type offer different conditions for study (study hours, time for preparing documents for users, etc.)

American researchers may use various services provided by the archives in Slovakia. Foremost they request genealogical research. Genealogical research can be started only after a written application has been delivered to the appropriate archive. A complete appli-

cation form should include the name and the address of the applicant, detailed information about the person to be searched (name, date and place of birth, religion, detailed information on relatives, etc.), the applicant's requirements on the extent of research (direct family line, all main family lines, all ancestors, etc.). It is also very important to specify requirements on the format of research report. Each response must contain the findings of the research and the fee calculation. If the applicant wishes, the copies of the archival document, authorized extract from registers, genealogical tables of the family lines (pedigree charts) or tables of children born in one family (family group sheets) can be enclosed with the report. The applicant should consider whether he/she needs the authorized copies from the registers (they can be used as indentures) because a fee is charged for each. If the data are for personal use, it is best to ask for genealogical tables of various types.

It is necessary to fix the highest financial limit the applicant is willing to pay. This is because all services provided from the start of the genealogical research are charged. The research fee calculation is the same for each archive in Slovakia. Nevertheless, their price depends on the research time which can vary according to the complexity of research. Negative results must be paid, too. That is because the applicant does not pay for the results but for the time that was spent on research. The reports are usually provided in the Slovak language. Fees are charged for a translation into English. Providing for translation service, however, depends on whether the archive has an employee on staff who is able to translate the report or other documents into English.

The archives in Slovakia also provide copies of the archive documents. Nevertheless, not every document may be copied. According to the rules of study permission for copying is given by the director of archives after he/she has taken into account the conditions of requested document. As a rule, copies of parish registers, bound books, or damaged documents are not provided. Those who are interested in copying the parish registers are advised to use the microfilms that were made by Family History Library of Genealogical Society of Utah.

Many other possibilities exist for using the documents in the Slovak archives. The archivists are always ready to assist those who are interested in the use of the archival heritage of the Slovak Republic.